Meaningful Lines

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Abstract: The essay presents, first, some key concepts for analyzing the visual form of comics and graphic novels. Second, it proposes some concrete and easily adaptable exercises for classroom use. The aim is to sharpen students' awareness for the way in which visual communication works in comics and graphic novels, and thus to enhance their media literacy.

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MEANINGFUL LINES

Der vorliegende Artikel präsentiert erstens einige zentrale Konzepte zur Analyse visueller Formelemente in Comics und Graphic Novels. Zweitens werden konkrete und flexibel anpassbare Übungen für den Unterricht vorgestellt. Ziel ist es, das Bewusstsein der Schüler*innen für visuelle Kommunikation in Comics und Graphic Novels zu schärfen und somit ihre Medienkompetenz zu erhöhen.

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Why Comics? And Why Visual Form?

If enabling students to understand and appreciate other cultures is a key aim of foreign language teaching, then there is a strong case to be made that comics ought to become a staple topic of instruction – at least for teachers of English and French.[1] Together with Japanese versions of the medium, the Anglo-American and the Franco-Belgian traditions arguably constitute the core of global comics production (Mazur & Danner, 2014, pp. 11–18). Moreover, in the Anglophone world – and, in particular, in the United States – two notable cultural phenomena of recent decades testify to the continuing, perhaps even growing importance of understanding comics: the rise of the so-called graphic novel (Baetens & Frey, 2015; Tabachnick, 2017), and a seemingly endless cycle of highly lucrative comics-to-film adaptations (e.g. Burke, 2015). In addition, beyond 'merely' enabling students to appreciate particular cultures and their aesthetic productions, working with comics can provide them with a better general understanding of visual culture: its modes, its mechanisms, and its meanings. However, in order to foster such media literacy, teachers need specific methods for drawing students' attention not only to character types, plot structures, and common themes, but also to aspects of visual form – in short, not just to what is being told, but also to how the content is presented on the page. The classroom activities suggested here aim to do just this: to provide teachers with ways of introducing some key analytical terminology and, at the same time, to demonstrate why these terms will enhance students' ability to understand comics and their visual form.

To be useful in practice, ideas for teaching need to be adaptable to different circumstances. The classroom activities outlined below could form part of a special project week on comics, but they could also be used as a short theory input to prepare students for reading a particular comic or graphic novel in class (e.g. a comics

1 I would like to thank Rahel Rivera and Sarah Chevalier for their feedback on draft versions of this article, as well as the editors of Babylonia for their precise and useful comments.

adaptation of a Shakespeare play or a Sherlock Holmes novel). Alternatively, one could liaise with an arts teacher to find out if they can include some parallel or follow-up activities on comics in their class. With a view to time constraints, the article first presents a relatively basic, time-efficient and teacher-centered exercise that one ought to be able to complete in one single lesson. This exercise is then supplemented with two versions of a more intensive and time-consuming activity: a minor extension which ought to fit into one additional lesson, and a major extension which will require at least two additional lessons. Besides consolidating the knowledge acquired during the first exercise, these extensions will foster some additional skills (specifically, the use of digital technologies, visual creativity, writing and presenting skills, and some basic understanding of copyright regulations). Experienced teachers will no doubt immediately be able to think of yet further adaptations of the basic concept underlying these activities, depending on their own interests and constraints as well as on students' needs and abilities.[2]

Key Terminology

Most students will have some experience with reading comics, which makes it reasonable to assume that they will recognize Fig. 1 as a schematized version of a comics page. At the same time, students (and perhaps instructors, too) may find it difficult to discuss such images, in part due to the lack of a shared critical vocabulary. Instructors can begin to remedy this situation by providing an alphabetic list of key terms and their meanings, such as the one included here (the terms and explanations refer to Fig. 1):

border / frame: line drawn around a caption (c), panel (I–VI), speech balloon (a, b, e), onomatopoeia (d) or thought bubble (f)

caption (c): often used to provide various types of narrative commentary

color: may, among other things, be used to accentuate formal elements (e.g. the use of sepia for caption c in Fig. 1, perhaps to evoke the feel of an old, yellowed piece of paper; or the use of red for the border of panel VI)

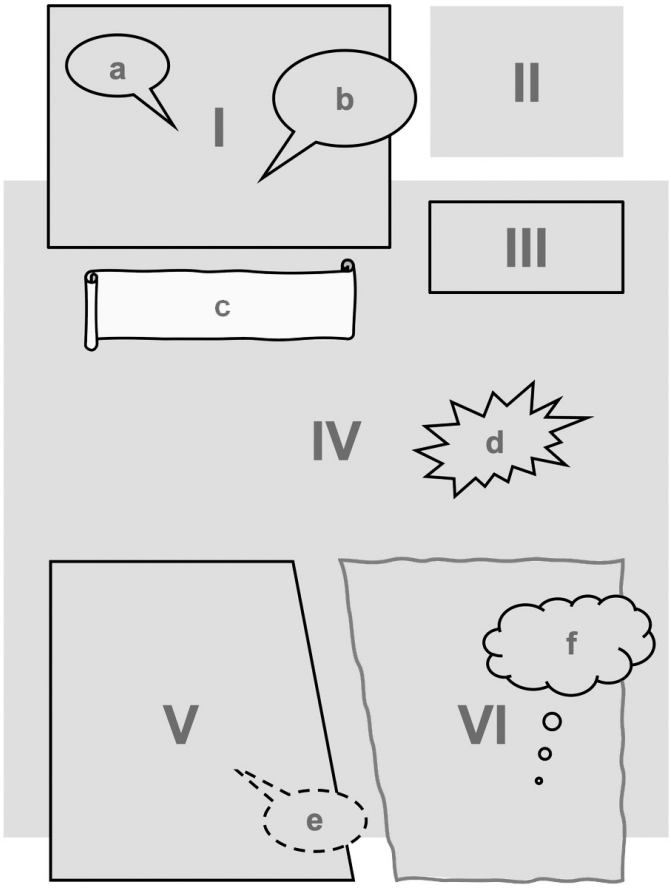

Fig. 1: Some formal elements that are commonly used in comics.

gridding or paneling: the action of dividing the available space on the page into separate image units (i.e. panels; see below)

gutter: the – often, but not necessarily white – space between panels (e.g. between panels I and II), or between a panel and the edge of the page

hyperframe: the outline of all the structural elements on a comics page (i.e. panels, speech balloons, thought bubbles, etc.); the total or combined, 'contentless' shape of all the structural elements (example: Fig. 1 as a whole can be seen as a hyperframe, i.e. it shows the outline of all the structural elements of a comics page, but no specific content)

line: can convey different types of meaning, depending on the way they are drawn (examples: the dashed line of speech balloon (e) might indicate whispering; the squiggly red line used for panel VI accentuates the panel, possibly indicating a different status in terms of narrative level, such as a character dreaming or remembering something)

2 All images included in this article can be downloaded at the following page:

In order to foster such media literacy, teachers need specific methods for drawing students' attention not only to character types, plot structures, and common themes, but also to aspects of visual form – in short, not just to what is being told, but also to how the content is presented on the page.

multiframe: the totality of all the hyperframes used in one particular comic; a given comic book's overall visual structure (which is a virtual construct that only exists in the minds of individual readers, i.e. one never actually sees the entire multiframe because it is distributed across all the pages of a given comic book)

onomatopoeia / sound effects: expressions like WHAM! or BOOM! (with or without frame; such a frame might look like the empty shape d in Fig. 1)

page layout / page architecture / mise-en-page: the underlying panel grid (i.e. the arrangement of all the panels on a page; the hyperframe, minus speech balloons, captions, etc.); can be subdivided into four types (Peeters, 2007; rev. by Groensteen 2007, pp. 92–95; see also Cohn, 2009):

- **regular page layout:** all pages paneled in exactly the same way; no (or very little) variation, irrespective of narrative dynamics
- **rhetorical page layout:** the most common type in contemporary comics; changes in layout depend on narrative dynamics (e.g. one very big panel for a view from a mountain top vs. a series of small panels for a chase scene)
- **decorative page layout:** layout varies, but the variations are motivated primarily by aesthetic considerations, rather than linked to narrative dynamics
- **productive page layout:** a very rare type; page layout follows a formal, conceptual logic that is independent of the narrative content and also not primarily decorative; layout seems to determine the content rather than the other way around (example: one panel on page one, two panels on page two, three panels on page three, etc.)

panel: a single image on a comics page (I–VI)

- **accentuated panel:** best thought of in relative terms, within a given context (example: in Fig. 1, VI is more accentuated than III or V); a panel can be accentuated through its site (i.e. position on the page), size, shape, and/or style of border
- **bleed panel:** a panel that 'bleeds' into the edge of the page (panel IV in Fig. 1 is an – unframed – bleed panel)
- **double-page panel (or double-page spread):** a single panel covers both facing pages in a comic
- **full-page panel / full-page splash:** one single panel covers an entire page
- **framed panel** (I, III, V, VI)
- **splash panel:** a very large, visually dominant panel (at least half a page; in Fig. 1, IV does not 'feel' like a true splash panel because a large part of it is covered by other panels, which reduces its visual prominence)
- **superimposed panel** (example: III is superimposed on IV; I, V, and Vi are partially superimposed on IV)
- **unframed / borderless panel** (II, IV)

speech balloon / speech bubble (a, b, e): like panels, speech balloons can have different types of borders (e.g. dashed as in e, to indicate whispering; but also squiggly, thick, borderless, etc.)

tail / pointer: the element attached to a speech balloon or thought bubble that points toward the character(s) from which the utterances emanate; onomatopoeia often do not have a tail (cf. d in Fig. 1), whereas most speech balloons and thought bubbles do

thought bubble (f): as is the case with speech balloons, the style of the border may vary (e.g. dashed vs. regular or no line)

The above is, of course, by no means a complete list, and instructors may wish to adapt, shorten, or expand it (e.g. by adding further terms from McCloud, 1994; Cohn, 2014; or Abel & Klein, 2016). For example, when reading and analyzing comics, one would also have to consider visual echoes across different pages, or examine the narrative rhythms created by recurring patterns as well as irregularities in the page layout (e.g. Groensteen, 2011, pp. 133–158). However, for the exercises presented here, the terms included above ought to suffice.

Classroom Activity: Showing That Visual Form Matters

The aim of the first, basic exercise is twofold: to encourage students to apply at least some of the terminology introduced above, and to demonstrate to them how dramatically the meaning of a given image may change, depending on the visual forms 'imposed' on it. To do so, instructors will first have to provide students with their adapted list of terms (e.g. based on the one provided above)

and explain these terms (e.g. by using Fig. 1). Once the terms are familiar to all students, teachers can display Fig. 2 and ask the students to describe this double page using the appropriate terminology, such as *splash page* or *framed* vs. *unframed panels*. Next, the class can be split into buzz groups to discuss the following questions: 'What is the relation between these two characters? What could be happening here?' As a next step, the groups can share some of their ideas with the class. In all likelihood, their 'solutions' will not be identical, which will serve to highlight that – at least when taken out of context – a particular combination of content and form may allow for a range of different meanings.

However, while the meaning of the scene may not be unequivocal, the visual cues in Fig. 2 may still encourage certain readings and, by implication, discourage others. To demonstrate this, instructors can now show Fig. 3, which contains fairly different cues: the two framed panels from Fig. 2 are unframed here, while one of the previously unframed panels is now accentuated through the use of a thick, red border. The questions to ask students are: 'What has changed? Do you read the image differently now?' A possible answer might be: 'The page layout of Fig. 2 encourages a reading that posits the two characters as opposed to each other. By contrast, the accentuated panel in Fig. 3 draws attention away from the opposition between them, focusing instead on what lies between them. In other words, whereas Fig. 2 emphasizes contrast and conflict, Fig. 3 focuses on what connects them; in Fig. 2, they glare at each other, while, in Fig. 3, they both look at what is shown in the panel framed in red.' Once again, it is not necessary for everyone to agree with one particular reading. Rather, it is sufficient if the majority of the students agrees that the formal change significantly affects their reading of the scene.

Building on this insight, the next step is intended to show how the visual form of a comics page can affect one's reading of a page even if the context is fairly clearly defined. To do so, instructors can display Fig. 2 once again and tell students to work on the following assumption: 'The two characters are mortal enemies, with the one on the left threatening to attack the character on the right.' The students are then asked the following question: 'Which of the two is more likely to win the ensuing battlew?' It is probably best to ask students to vote on this question by a simple show of hands – and, in all likelihood, the majority will opt for the larger character on the left. (If there is enough time, one could then ask students to explain their decision. For example, it is possible that some students see the character on the right as stronger because he is positioned close to the center of the page; by contrast, they may argue, the character on the left is 'squeezed' against the margin, as if backing off, perhaps in fear.)[3] The instructor then proceeds to display Fig. 4, asking the following questions: 'Compared to the previous

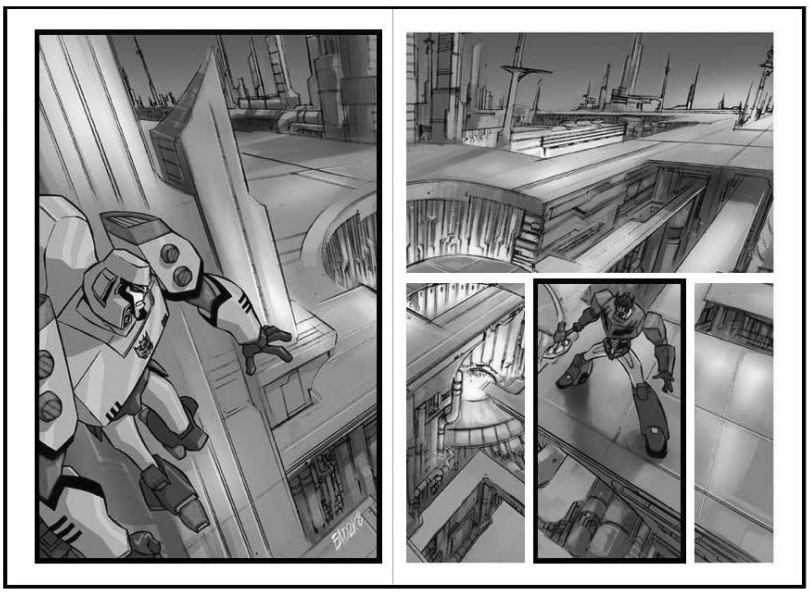

Fig. 2: Two characters are placed within framed panels. (adapted from "Battle for Cybertron," © 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission)

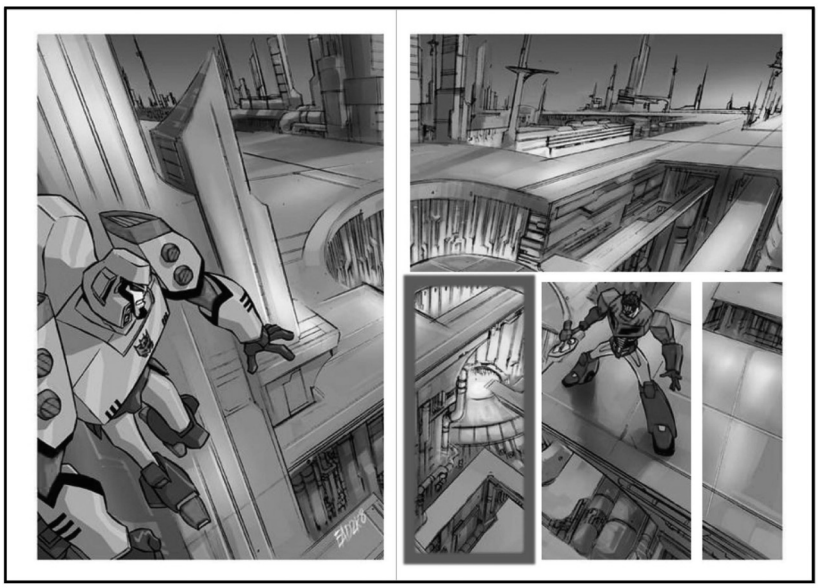

Fig. 3: A single panel with a red frame may change the way we read the scene. (adapted from "Battle for Cybertron," © 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission)

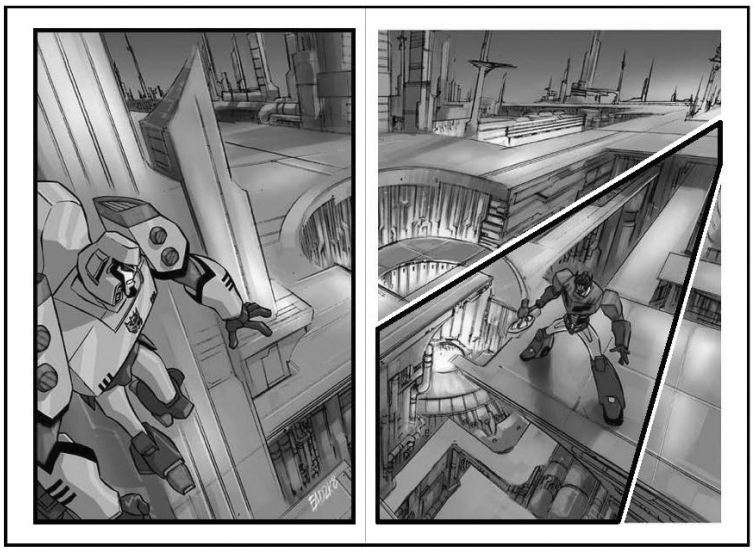

Fig. 4: Angular shapes render the panels – and arguably the character – more dynamic. (adapted from "Battle for Cybertron," © 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission)

Fig. 5: A speech balloon that points downward and remains within the frame of the panel. (adapted from "Battle for Cybertron," © 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission)

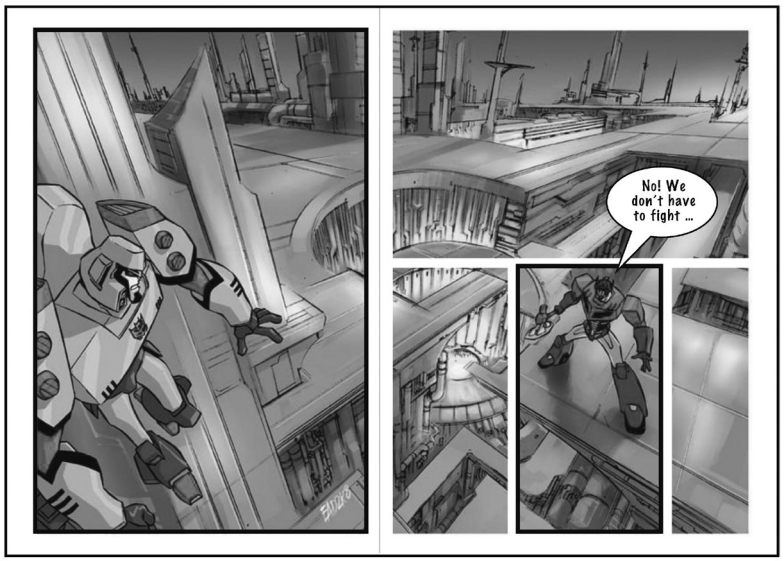

Fig. 6: The 'tone' of the words changes if the speech balloon points upward and breaks the frame. (adapted from "Battle for Cybertron," © 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission)

image, have the odds shifted now (i.e. is the power dynamic between these two characters different now)? If so, why?' Some students may now argue that the different paneling makes the character on the right appear stronger than in the previous version. In Fig. 3, the character on the right is given very little space; he is 'boxed into' a small panel that is clearly less accentuated than the full-page panel on the left. By contrast, in Fig. 4, the larger size and more unusual shape of the panels on the right-hand page render them far more accentuated, and thus visually 'stronger' – a fact that is only enhanced by the way in which the panel frame aligns with the diagonals of the visual content, thus 'flowing with' the energy created by the drawing's composition (rather than 'breaking it up,' as in Fig. 3). As earlier, there is room for various interpretations. The only requirement is a basic consensus regarding the power of visual form to alter our assessment of a given scene even when the narrative premise seems clearly defined. The final step in this first, basic exercise is intended to demonstrate that even the meaning of words themselves can be subtly affected by changes to visual form. The layout of Fig. 5 is identical to Fig. 2, except for the addition of a single speech balloon. When displaying this image, instructors may want to ask students whether this little piece of dialogue changes their view of the two characters: 'Assuming that one of them is the villain, which one is it?' Chances are that many students will pick the character on the left, as he seems to be the one who wants to fight. The instructor can then ask students to imagine how these words might be spoken: 'Try to describe the sound and tone.' Next, the instructor reveals Fig. 6 and asks: 'Do you think that the tone is different now? If so, how?' While, as usual, unanimity is unlikely, it is quite probable that many students will rate the character's tone in Fig. 6 as more assertive or confident because the speech balloon points upward, breaking through the border of the framed panel and thus expanding, as it were, the character's space – whereas, in Fig. 5, the

3 It may be worth asking students why using the pronoun he may seem the obvious choice when referring to these characters, even though she is equally possible, and it or singular they arguably more accurate in the case of 'genderless' robots.

speech balloon remains confined within a small, framed panel. In other words, just as is the case with the panels themselves, the placement of the speech balloons may subtly affect the tone of the content – and thus also its meaning.

More generally, this exercise shows that considering alternatives is an extremely effective way of understanding the impact of any given formal device ('If it were X rather than Y, how would the effect change?'). Rather than just being limited to comics, this is a vital aspect of media literacy as a whole: an important transferable skill which can be used again when dealing with prose fiction, poetry or film in the classroom. The focus here will, however, remain on the use of comics. More particularly, the following two extended activities are intended to deepen students' understanding of the role of visual form in the meaning-making process specific to comics, while at the same time allowing them to practice additional skills.

A Minor Extension: Using Comics to Tell Stories

The first, shorter extension concentrates on promoting students' writing, storytelling, and presentation skills. In addition, this activity will allow students to think in more detail about the ways in which narrative context, visual form, and the specific content of a comics page interact. The best way to proceed is to divide the class into groups. Each group is given a hardcopy of Fig. 7, together with the following tasks:

- write an outline of a short, simple story of which the scene depicted here forms a part;
- add some short sentences to the three speech balloons and the thought bubble, to 'flesh out' this particular scene's meaning within the context of your story;
- choose a speaker who will present your group's story and scene in class. (An alternative would be to have them present the scene in a roleplay.)

The emphasis during this first part of the current exercise will clearly be on writing, storytelling, and presentation skills, possibly combined with constructive error correction by peers.

Once all the groups have presented their stories, the instructor can (re-)direct students' attention to aspects of visual form. Specifically, the focus can now be placed on the temporal order or sequence

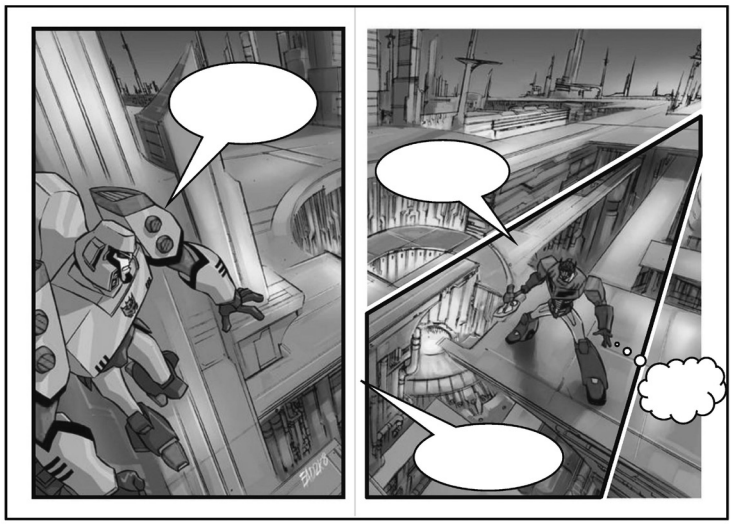

Fig. 7: Is the order in which one should read the speech balloons and the thought bubble clear? (adapted from "Battle for Cybertron," © 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission)

in which the three speech balloons and the thought bubble in Fig. 7 are to be read. It is, for example, highly likely that all groups will have adopted the 'left-to-right and top-to-bottom' reading convention that generally applies in the Anglo-American and the Franco-Belgian tradition (but not in Japanese comics; see Jüngst, 2014). Accordingly, students will almost certainly have assumed that the character on the left speaks first, followed by the character on the right (speech balloon in the top half of the right-hand page). The temporal sequence for the next two items may, however, be subject to disagreement: Are we to assume that the speech balloon in the lower half of the right-hand page temporally precedes – i.e. 'happens earlier' – than the thought bubble on the far right? Or ought we instead posit that the thought bubble precedes the speech balloon? If one applies the basic reading convention (left-to-right and top-to-bottom) while focusing exclusively on the two items in question, i.e. the speech balloon and the thought bubble, then it would seem that the latter must come first because it is placed higher up on the page. However, if one prioritizes the visual cues provided by the three panels on the right-hand page rather than the two 'speech items' in question, then there is an equally convincing case to be made that the very small panel on the far right (which contains the thought bubble) must come last in the temporal sequence. This in turn would mean that the thought bubble cannot precede the speech balloon because the latter is placed in an 'earlier' panel. Once again, the discussion

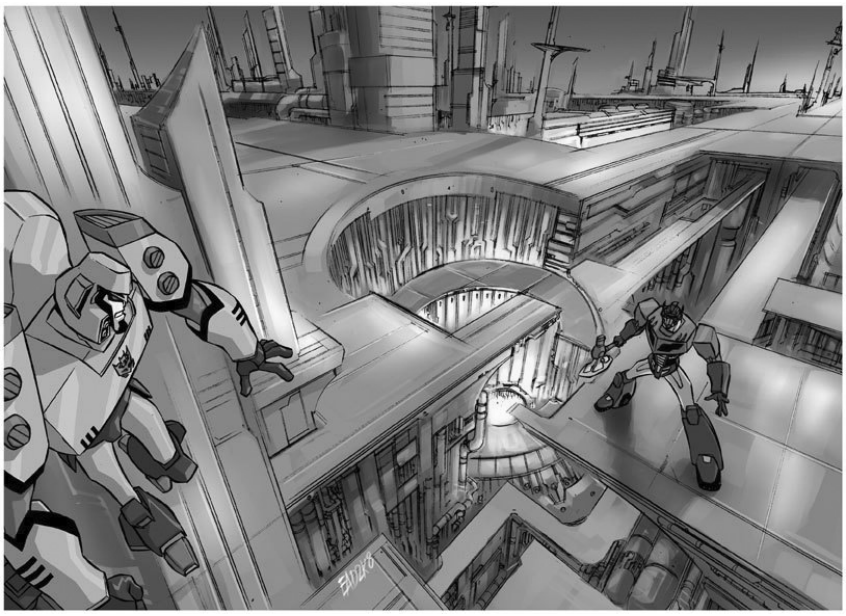

Fig. 9: The original of "Battle for Cybertron" (© 2008 Elmer Damaso, used by permission; https://www.deviantart.com/iq40/art/Battle-for-Cybertron-89870793)

Fig. 10: Another image that would be suitable. ("Tellurion 253" © 2019 MattRhodesArt, used by permission; https://www.deviantart.com/mattrhodesart/art/Tellurion-253-815055359)

4 If an artist wanted to avoid the kind of temporal ambiguity created in Fig. 7, they could change the positions of the two 'offending' items, as shown in Fig. 8. If there is sufficient time left, instructors may ask students to vote on whether or not they agree that the temporal sequence is less ambiguous in Fig. 8 than in Fig. 7. Moreover, it may be worth pointing out that ambiguity is not necessarily an artistic flaw, but that in fact it could also be exploited strategically, for example to create – by primarily visual means – a sense of aimlessness, uncertainty, or confusion.)

5 The main advantage of working with digital technologies is that revision tends to be easier. With paper and scissors, once you cut the image, there's (almost) no going back..

6 e.g. https://pixlr.com/x/

may not yield a unanimous reading – and once again, this will not invalidate the point of the exercise, which in addition to giving students an opportunity for creative storytelling, provides them with a better sense of the way in which panel divisions, as well as the arrangement of other items on the page, interact with specific reading conventions to create an impression of sequential order and thus temporal sequence, which in turn is one of the fundamental building blocks of narrative art itself.[4]

A Major Extension: Paneling a Comics Page

Instructors who have more time at their disposal may want to extend the task described in the preceding section even further by providing students with pre-existing images that they can use to create a comics page of their own. To explain the task, instructors may want to display Fig. 9, which shows the original, unpaneled image used to create Fig. 2–8. First, instructors may want to highlight that the only difference between a drawing like Fig. 9 and a comics page is the fact that the latter has a hyperframe; as soon as one adds panel divisions and/or some of the other items (e.g. speech balloons or captions), a simple drawing becomes a comic. Next, teachers may want to describe how this can be done. If no digital tools are available, the students can work with scissors, glue, paper and pens.[5] However, it is far easier to draft and redraft using computer-based solutions. Students could, for example, insert an image like Fig. 9 into a Word document and then add the required gutters, panel frames, and text items to the image. (Word even contains some comic-type template shapes, such as speech balloons and thought bubbles. However, other types of software, including free online solutions, will work just as well.[6] Instructors simply need to make sure that students have access to the appropriate tool, and that they can help those students who do not know how to use it.) Ultimately, whichever software one chooses, the task of turning a pre-existing image into a comics page will allow students to learn some new computer skills, or at least to apply and refine their previous knowledge.

Beyond software and creative design skills, the exercise also allows instructors to discuss questions of copyright and

fair use. One of the key requirements for this exercise is, after all, the use and adaptation of pre-existing images. The most suitable types of images fulfill the following four criteria:

› landscape rather than portrait format;
› at least two characters (or character-like entities), one in the left-hand and the other in the right-hand half of the image;
› not too crowded or busy, to ensure that there is sufficient space for students to add panel divisions, speech balloons, etc.;
› no character or object right in the middle of the image, as this may end up looking peculiar once the image is divided into two pages.

Fig. 10 provides one further example of the type of images that are ideal for the present purpose. (Both Fig. 9 and Fig. 10 were taken from Deviantart.com, and the artists have kindly granted permission for their images to be used in a non-profit educational context.) In addition to explaining the exercise properly, instructors may want to alert students to the problems associated with reusing images, and perhaps discuss such concepts as fair use, creative commons licenses, and copyright issues more generally.

The exercise itself is simply a more extensive version of the previous one, in that students are given similar tasks but no ready-made, pre-paneled page. Instead, students will be responsible for paneling the image, thus leading to a more hands-on and creative use of the terminology and knowledge introduced in the initial, basic exercise. The full list of tasks for the extended exercise – once again conducted in groups – might be as follows:

› write an outline of a short, simple story – and include the scene depicted here as part of your story;
› turn the drawing into a comic page by adding panels, speech balloons, etc. to the image;
› be prepared to explain your narrative and visual choices, using the appropriate vocabulary;
› report on difficulties you encountered when designing the page (technical as well as aesthetic; you may, for example, want to present preliminary versions that you ended up rejecting, and explain why you did so);
› choose a speaker who will present your group's story, design process, and final product in class.

Obviously, this extended version of the exercise may not be suitable for all instructors, as it involves either a substantial amount of homework, or a considerable amount of class-time – and very likely both. However, for instructors that do have sufficient leeway (e.g. during a project week), this second, major extension of the basic exercise will likely prove more interesting than the previous one, as it allows students to be more creative, which in turn is likely to increase their motivation, and thus to lead to more varied and interesting outcomes.

Conclusion: Denaturalizing Formal Conventions

Comics, cartoons, and graphic novels are complex phenomena with long and diverse historical trajectories. Accordingly, the aim of activities such as those presented here cannot be to cover everything. As indicated earlier, the reading conventions in manga, for example, differ markedly from the Anglo-American and Franco-Belgian traditions – and even within these traditions, there have been major historical shifts, as well as alternative aesthetics defined by their opposition to mainstream conventions (e.g. Wolk, 2007, pp. 29–59). If one were to design a special project week or intensive course on comics and graphic novels, these and other issues could, perhaps, also be explored. Nevertheless, the exercises presented here do provide students with some comics-specific vocabulary and with the opportunity to apply this new knowledge in creative ways while also practicing other skills such as writing, presenting, storytelling, and the use of digital technologies. In addition, and more fundamentally, the exercise helps them to recognize some seemingly obvious or natural features of a visual medium as what they are: particular aesthetic strategies, based on more or less conscious decisions, and shaped by historically specific conventions. Moreover, because students can more readily analyze a given page and even envision alternative designs, the visual form of comics will cease to be, as it were, hidden in plain sight. Instead of being taken for granted, these formal features will become significant and meaningful in themselves. To denaturalize conventions by imagining and designing alternative solutions: a useful, indeed vital transferable skill.

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